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Rebuilding a Resilient Democracy in the United States

The Challenges for the Biden Administration

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Executive Summary

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The past several months has been one of the most tumultuous periods surrounding the election of a U.S. president in American history. There have been other times of political division and dramatic events, but it is hard to envision a time when the fear for the future of American democracy was as great as during the assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. Throughout Donald Trump's presidency, the national discourse revolved around the question of "how could this have happened" or, after the November 2020 election, how despite evidence of extraordinary levels of deliberate falsehoods and misinformation, over 74 million American voters still voted for Trump.

The purpose of this report is to understand the structural and social dynamics that contributed to Trump's rise to power to present a framework for understanding the challenges that President Joe Biden will face in repairing and rebuilding a resilient U.S. democratic system of government.

How could American democracy have been so weakened? In essence, Trump was not a cause but a symptom of a confluence of economic, social, and political conditions that over four decades helped shape a social and political climate that weakened U.S. democratic institutions and the capacity to govern. Rising economic inequality and social inequalities led to a decline in social equality and mobility. Existing inequalities such as structural racism and discrimination were ignored. Parallel to these economic and social shifts were political changes that intensified polarization and increased partisanship. The increasing political stalemate in the country made governing more difficult and institutions more fragile and vulnerable to partisan politics. As instances of government failure increased, so did the public's distrust of government.

The report then turns to the American public and factors shaping public attitudes—income, race, education, gender—to examine their effects and to understand why the American public is so deeply divided. The Biden administration will have to face the ongoing effects of Trumpism and a deeply divided American society and media landscape. The relevant question, for U.S. democracy, is whether the American political elite is willing to return to bipartisanship and a consensual form of politics, placing the public good over partisan interests and constructing policy solutions supported by a majority of citizens.

The concluding section looks to the question of reinvigorating U.S. democracy and of transatlantic relations. President Biden has signaled a strong commitment to democracy renewal at home and internationally. This opens the way for the United States and Europe to join global efforts of Western and non-Western democracies in defending democracy by reinforcing democratic resilience at home and supporting democracy assistance abroad.

I. Introduction

Democratic representative governments are tasked with responding to political, social, and economic changes to preserve the common good and provide security and prosperity to all their citizens. The past four tumultuous and intensely divisive years of the Trump presidency exposed and exacerbated weaknesses in governing institutions to such a degree that there is an overwhelming concern for the future of U.S. democracy.

This report examines the structural and social dynamics that contributed to Trump's rise to power. Trump was not a cause but a symptom of a confluence of economic, social, and political conditions that over four decades helped shape a social and political climate that weakened U.S. democratic institutions and the capacity to govern. The shocking assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 revealed how deep the threat is and how difficult the task of rebuilding American democratic institutions and norms will be in the next few years.

How did we get here? From 2016-2019, Carlos Lozada, the *Washington Post's* book critic, read 150 books about Trump to find clues as to why so many people voted for Trump in 2016. After this Herculean task, the more important question, for Lozada, "was not how we got here, but how we thought here."[1] This report reveals that how we got here and how we thought here are closely connected to a complex narrative of growing economic and social inequalities, a federal government incapable of meeting citizens' needs or repairing growing institutional fragility, and a dysfunctional political system wracked by deep polarization and negative partisanship that has carved deep divisions within the American electorate. The social divisions, in turn, have been fueled by a sharply divided media landscape that offers two diametrically opposed and antagonistic views of the world to its viewership.

Many Americans were shocked at Trump's victory but were confident that the country's democratic system of government and its institutions were strong enough to counteract and thus thwart any potentially harmful actions by the administration. The ease with which democratic norms, institutions, and practices could be swept aside by Trump's actions came as the second shock. The general view that has emerged was that for the past forty years, political leaders on both sides of the aisle failed to fulfill their responsibilities to the American citizenry: to respond to complex challenges and crises in ways that gave the U.S. government the capacity to remain resilient and adaptive in the face of change.

As Lozada points out, explanations for the Trump phenomenon generally fell into two categories: economic and social. The argument presented here explores both economic and social explanations, setting them within the context of political changes over past decades that led to increasing polarization and partisan divisions and the weakening of democratic institutions.

The report will examine the economic factors that have led to a rise in economic inequality and the socio-cultural factors that have contributed to a decline in social mobility. Parallel to these economic and social shifts are political changes that intensified polarization and increased partisanship. The increasing political stalemate in the country made governing more difficult and institutions more fragile and vulnerable to partisan politics. As instances of government failure increased, so did the public's distrust and view that the government and their elected representatives are beholden to special interests and so ignore average Americans. Trump was not the root cause, but he accelerated and intensified the effects of these trends. His electoral victory highlighted an overwhelming crisis of confidence and lack of trust in government.

The report then turns to factors shaping American public attitudes—income, race, education, gender—to examine the effects and to understand why the American public is so deeply divided. The Biden administration faces daunting challenges in reinvigorating U.S. democracy, building institutional resilience, and repairing America's credibility globally. The caveat, however, is that the new administration will have to continue to reckon with Trumpism, a broken political and party system, and a deeply divided American society and media landscape.

A Resilient Democracy

A democracy is a system of government ruled by the people who, through free and fair elections, elect representatives to govern them. A democracy is further characterized by a balance (and a tension) between majority rule and minority rights, by the protection of civil liberties and individual rights, an independent judiciary, and the rule of law. Organized parties are an essential part of democracy, where citizens participate in choosing the country's direction.

Current democracies face a complex set of policy problems that can undermine the quality and performance of democratic institutions. Resilience refers to the capacity of a governing system to manage, adapt, and recover from the stress and pressure of complex challenges and crises that, if not addressed, can lead to systemic weakness or failure.[2] The divisive politics during the Trump administration exposed significant weaknesses in the American democratic system of government. Much effort has been made to understand the mix of factors that led to this decline and what actions are needed to build democratic resilience back into U.S. institutions.

In a democracy, decision-making is a process of balancing competing interests to find a solution that serves the public good and achieves majority agreement. Much of the attention has focused on what many observers feel has been the failure of American leaders over several decades to adapt the institutions of governance to changes driven by globalization, trade, and new technologies that reshaped the international system and transformed societies. Globalization, the fluidity of capital, and low-cost competition shut down whole industrial sectors. Good-paying middle-class jobs were lost, and displaced workers struggled to find new jobs in a rapidly shifting economy and labor market. These broad structural shifts brought in their wake corresponding social and cultural displacement, fears, and anxieties. Those "left behind" by the forces of globalization often felt a loss of identity, threatened by the flow of people, ideas, and cultural changes.

Most explanations point to either economic factors or socio-cultural factors in explaining, for example, why 74.2 million people, or 46.8% of Americans, voted for Trump in November 2020, or why even after the attack on the U.S. Capitol, almost 8 in 10 Republicans still support him and nearly three-quarters of Republicans want him to remain active in the Republican party.[3] In this sense, Trump is seen not as a cause but as an outcome of existing economic, socio-cultural, and political trends that over the decades weakened U.S. democracy and set the stage for Trump's 2016 victory.

The shock of Donald Trump beating a field of 16 Republican party candidates to win the party's nomination and eventually the election led to a burgeoning cottage industry to explain this outcome. Why did so many Americans vote for Trump in 2016? The economic explanations given reflect long-term rising trends in economic inequality and economic dislocation in the United States. Secondly, socio-cultural explanations were cited as reasons for Trump's victory: his appeal to an alienated and "forgotten" group of working class Americans, the attack on the educated "elite" liberal class, the stoking of racial and ethnic fears and xenophobia, and the "Make America Great Again" theme that struck a deep chord among followers. Both explanations are relevant and provide a more detailed account of how American politics got here and thought here.

II. Inequality

Economic Inequality

The postwar period in American history saw significant changes in the international system and in American society. The United States experienced an economic boom in the decades after World War II that led to an unprecedented level of economic growth and prosperity. Between 1945 and 1970, incomes grew rapidly and rose across all levels of income.

The 1970s, however, were marked by growing political and economic problems, with a worsening economy marked by a recession and high levels of inflation and unemployment. Dissatisfaction with the Democratic President Jimmy Carter and opposition to the status quo was high. Voters, drawn to Reagan's optimism and vision for America, elected him in a landslide. He gave conservatism a new and appealing look.

Smaller government was the rallying cry. As Reagan stated in his January 20, 1981 inaugural address: "Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem." Once in office, Reagan moved to implement his "supply-side" economics: tax cuts for the wealthy would free them to spend and invest more, which would stimulate the economy, create new jobs, and ultimately generate even more revenue for the federal government. Under his watch, business regulations were eliminated and tax cuts that benefited corporations and the wealthy were implemented. However, on the other side of the ledger, the Republicans' promised cuts in government spending to offset tax reductions never really materialized; the cuts made in some social programs could not offset huge increases in defense spending and other government programs.[4]

Economists still debate how effective Reagan's laissez-fare economic policies were in contributing to economic growth. What is not disputable is that beginning in the 1970s, economic growth slowed, and inequality rose sharply. The scope of the problem can be seen in the trend data for both income and wealth inequality, both highly unevenly distributed in the U.S. population.

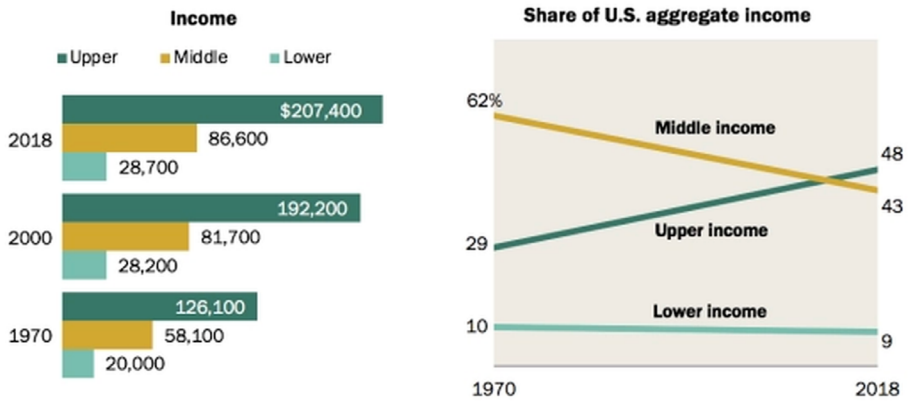
Trends in Income Inequality

Census data show that income inequality has reached the highest level since the U.S. Census Bureau began collecting data more than fifty years ago. From the late 1940s to the 1970s, family income in the United States grew at nearly the same pace across all levels of income, with real family income roughly doubling in that period.[5] Figure 1 shows that beginning in the 1970s, this pattern of shared prosperity ended, and income growth slowed for all income levels except at the very top.[6] And, while household family

Figure 1: *Income Inequality in U.S. Households*

The gaps in income between upper-income and middle- and lower-income households are rising, and the share held by middle-income households is falling

Median household income, in 2018 dollars, and share of U.S. aggregate household income, by income tier



Note: Households are assigned to income tiers based on their size-adjusted income. Incomes are scaled to reflect a three-person household. Revisions to the Current Population Survey affect the comparison of income data from 2014 onwards. See Methodology for details.
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of the Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements (IPUMS).
"Most Americans Say There Is Too Much Economic Inequality in the U.S., but Fewer Than Half Call It a Top Priority"

SOURCE: Horowitz et. al, "Most Americans Say There Is Too Much Economic Inequality in the U.S., But Fewer Than Half Call It a Priority," Pew Research Center, January 9, 2020

income did see some increase across income levels, the bottom twenty percent of Americans have not seen an increase in household family income since 1999.[7]

From 2000 to 2018, economic recessions and the Great Recession in 2008 were largely responsible for growth in household income rising only 0.3%. But the gap between high income earners and everyone else continued to widen. Looking at aggregate income between 1970-2018, the share of aggregate income of lower income households fell from 10% to 9% at the same time as the very wealthy increased their share from 29% to 48%. For middle-class Americans in this period, the household aggregate share fell from 62% to 43%.[8] Thus, while lower, mostly working-class income households remained relatively steady, it was the middle class that was forced to absorb the greatest decline.

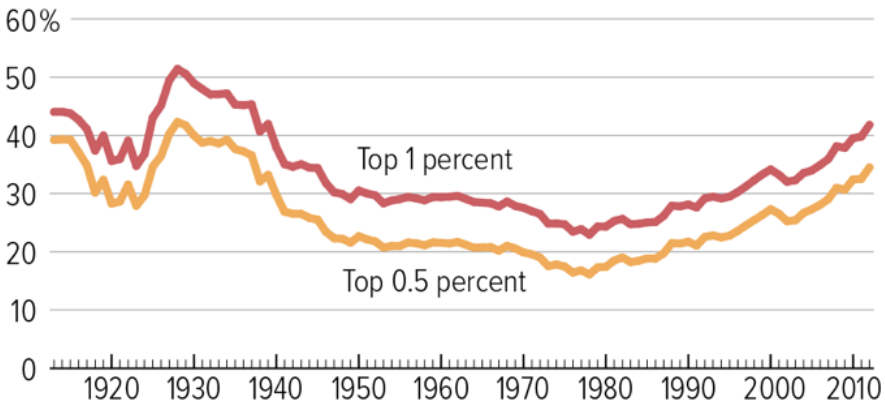
Trends in Wealth Inequality

The rise in wealth inequality—i.e. net worth, the value of everything a family owns minus the value of any debt—is even more alarming, accelerating from the 1980s on and reaching levels not seen since the 1920s, as figure 2 shows.[9]

To compare with the figures for income distribution: the top 10% of the income distribution held slightly more than half of all income, while the top 10% of the wealth distribution held more than 75% of all wealth in the country. For example, median household wealth in 2016 was $78,100, slightly lower (in adjusted dollars) than it was in 1983. In contrast, over the same period, the average wealth of the wealthiest one percent more than doubled, from $10.6 million to $26.4 million.[10] This concentration

Wealth Concentration Has Been Rising Toward Early 20th Century Levels

Share of total wealth held by the wealthiest families, 1913–2012



Source: Saez and Zucman, May 2016

SOURCE: Chad Stone, et. al, "A Guide to Statistics on Historical Trends in Income Inequality," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, updated January 13, 2020, http://www.cbpp.org

Figure 2: *Wealth Concentration in U.S. Households*

of wealth at the top comes at the expense of the middle and working classes, many of whom still have not recovered from the 2008 economic crisis.

Economists point out that wealth creation by itself is not a negative thing—provided that all citizens share in the largesse of rising levels of wealth. In the United States, income over the past several decades has risen for most Americans—dramatically so for wealthy Americans but much more slowly for everyone else.[11] The level of concentration of wealth in the United States, however, reflects a level of inequality that is singular among advanced liberal democracies; the United States has the highest level of income inequality among all G7 states.[12]

The fact that levels of inequality vary among advanced democratic countries suggests that part of the explanation about what creates these differences lies in the critical role played by domestic institutions and policy decisions that shape wealth distribution patterns.[13] Inequality can also create conditions that exacerbate social tensions, divisions, and unrest. In the United States, policy decisions by elites redistributed wealth in ways that increasingly disadvantaged middle and working classes. Income inequality and wealth inequality are even greater across racial and ethnic groups because of America's legacy of slavery and social and economic policies of successive administrations that structurally disadvantaged minority groups for generations. In the end, focusing solely on economic variables and economic growth won't resolve the problems the United States currently faces. Decision makers must work on strengthening the factors—education, healthcare—that build a foundation that provides equal opportunities to citizens and fuels economic and social mobility.[14]

Social Inequality

How rich or poor a country is affects social equality and upward mobility: the more inequality, the less social mobility in a society. Economic inequalities have social and political consequences, and nowhere was this more evident for the United States than in the recently published 2020 Social Progress Index. The Index measures a country's well-being, independent of economic factors, comparing each country to 15 countries with a similar GDP per capita. Among the 163 countries surveyed from 2011 to 2020, the United States was one of only three countries to suffer a decline in its ranking, falling from 19th to 28th place—now behind countries such as Greece, Cyprus, and Estonia.[15] It was the largest drop of any country in the world. Of the 50 variables that comprise the Index (measuring well-being, basic needs, and opportunity), the United States underperformed in nearly half (22) and overperformed in only one measure: the quality of its universities.[16]

Social Mobility. The Social Progress Index data point to the serious problem of social inequality in America. With rising income and wealth inequality comes weakening social mobility, particularly for the middle class. Many indicators of social mobility, such as education, income, and household ownership, show the difficulties average Americans now experience in forging a path to a better life. Importantly, persistent inequality, particularly in the United States, has as part of its foundation the legacy of structural racism and the inequalities it continues to perpetuate. Unequal levels of affluence exacerbate social inequality. The consequence: many Americans feel "left behind" as wages stagnate and jobs disappear, and they don't feel as if hard work matters anymore because they see the government rewarding immigrants or welfare recipients or "others" whom they perceive are less deserving. In tandem with these feelings of resentment is growing discontentment with and distrust of government for failing to respond to expressed needs and desires. And when income inequality rises and social mobility declines, so does the belief in the attainability of the American dream.[17]

The American dream is an aspirational belief that all individuals regardless of birth, class, or circumstance have an equal opportunity to achieve success and upward economic and social mobility, not by chance or birth but through hard work, risk-taking, and sacrifice.[18] Feelings about one's own economic stability and social status in American society are tied to this foundational belief in America's promises. But growing economic and social inequality have led to growing pessimism among many Americans about their prospects for a secure future.

Anticipating these fears and grievances, Trump's speeches were full of warnings about the Democrats "demolishing" the American dream.[19] With income inequality the highest it has been in 50 years and evidence of declining social mobility, many Americans, particularly the millennial generation, are pessimistic about their ability to achieve the American dream. Just over half of Americans believe it is attainable for them, and 37% believe it is less possible for them than it was for earlier generations.[20] The impact of economic inequality and the decline in upward mobility gives them reason to worry. World Economic Forum data show that fewer people in the lower and middle classes

are climbing the economic ladder: while children in the "middle class" (50th percentile in the data) born in 1940 had a 93% chance of earning more than their parents at age 30, children born in 1980 have only a 45% chance of doing the same.[21]

Americans' trust in their government and in each other are at record lows. They see many reasons for this: poor government performance, the government doing too much (or too little) or nothing at all. Americans believe money has corrupted the political process, namely, that politicians ignore the public because they are beholden to corporate money flowing into their campaign coffers. Trust at the personal level also has suffered, and Americans view this decline through the lens of social and political problems in society that have taken a toll on trust among each other.[22]

To sum up, a strong economy brings more confidence in economic and social progress and boosts optimism about government, but a sense of economic and social decline and fear of loss of status and privilege fuels distrust in government and its institutions.[23] Declining trust in government makes it harder to solve problems. Unfortunately, the American public's anger and distrust is not misplaced; evidence of government failures has been mounting for some time.

III. The Failure of Government

Paul Light's research on the history of U.S. government breakdowns provides an important piece of the story. Light emphasizes the link between the decline in public trust in government and demographic, social, and economic changes over the past several decades, asserting that decline in trust is also related to government breakdowns caused in large part by decades of political neglect. A government breakdown is a "time-specific event that reveals an administrative failure in how the federal government executes a law."[24] Light documented over 70 incidents of government breakdown from 1986 to mid-2020. These include the 9/11 attack, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the disastrous response to hurricanes Katrina and Maria, and the 2008 economic crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic is but the latest major crisis that has triggered innumerable smaller bureaucratic breakdowns in its wake. Light's data show that the number of government breakdowns is increasing and accelerating over time, as displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: *Government Breakdowns by Administration and Average Breakdown by Year, 1986-2020*

President	Terms	# per Administration	Average per/ Year
Ronald Reagan 1986-1989	1*	4	1.6
G.H.W. Bush 1989-1993	1	5	1.3
Bill Clinton 1993-2001	2	14	1.8
G.W. Bush 2001-2009	2	25	3.2
Barack Obama 2009-2017	2	28	3.5
Donald Trump 2017-2020	1	17	4.3

SOURCE: data from Paul C. Light, "Federal breakdowns accelerating," September 23, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/09/23/federal-breakdowns-are-accelerating/

*NOTE: data for President Reagan available for second term only.

The number of breakdowns per administration appears to show a sharp increase after 2000 and then decreasing under Trump's tenure, but dividing the numbers per year reveals the true story. In the years prior to 2000, government breakdowns averaged 1.4 per year but have been on an upward curve since then and have increased to 4.3 per year today. Under President Trump, the number of government breakdowns tripled compared to previous administrations.[25] Acceleration was fed by a steady decline in fiscal resources, aging infrastructure, and growing political turmoil and partisanship.

What contributed to these instances of government breakdown? Light identified five different aspects of the problem: policy (failure, poorly designed, no policy); resources (insufficient); structure (overlap, poor chain of command); leadership (poor qualifications or decision-making); and bureaucratic culture (confusing lines of communication, corruption, unethical conduct). Over time, the U.S. government became less capable of passing major reform bills to implement government reforms. It struggled to provide services (affordable health care, quality education for all students), became less accountable to the public and, as a consequence, contributed to the growing dissatisfaction and loss of trust among Americans.[26]

In sum, social and economic trends paralleled an ideological shift towards a changed political milieu with a more laissez-faire economic approach as part of a broader conservative agenda that prioritized small government, low taxes, and minimal economic and government regulation. The advent of this economic and political agenda under President Reagan resulted in deep cuts in government spending, taxes, and corporate regulation. Conservative views that gradually came to dominate the political discourse on the right saw government, as Reagan put it, not as the solution but as the problem. What became a strategy to fight a recession and stagflation became core principles of a new conservatism that ultimately set government as a threat to individual freedom: "As government expands, liberty contracts."[27]

Polarization vs. Partisanship

Political scientists point out that political polarization is not new, but this phase of negative partisanship has been particularly long and divisive. Studies show American citizens are increasingly polarized on a growing number of issues and have grown increasingly partisan in their political views. Polarization and negative partisanship have contributed to political tensions, but they are distinctly different factors. Polarization refers to ideological distinctions people have that shape their policy preferences, such as on gun control, abortion, or immigration, and that in turn divide them from others who don't share the same ideological preferences. Partisanship refers to general feelings of partiality towards one's own political party. Partisan loyalists accept the policy positions their party recommends, but these preferences need not be based on specific policy differences. Indeed, parties can and do change their position on policy issues. What is important is for loyalists to accept and follow the party's directives and positions that may or may not necessarily align with their own personal views.

Thus, differences about policy polarize people, but it is negative partisanship that entrenches these views and intensifies the political conflict. Key ideological divides can reinforce partisan divides, as is the case today.[28] With polarization at its highest level in over 50 years, it is the democratic norms of compromise and negotiation that have fallen victim to ideologically rigid mentalities and zero-sum political maneuvering. The U.S. presidential two-party system of government, with its "winner-take-all" elections, intensifies political competition—not in itself a negative trait, but when party leaders

prioritize party interests above the common good, democratic norms, institutions, and practices can suffer.

The effect has been growing partisan gridlock and declining government effectiveness. Political divisions are a natural consequence of the U.S. system of separated powers, but partisan gridlock is seen to have contributed to the weakening of U.S. democratic institutions of government in many different ways, with deleterious effects over the long term.

Examples of government breakdowns abound. The U.S. Congress has not passed a complete budget in over 20 years, relying on "continuing resolutions" to keep the government funded and avoid a shutdown while the political parties negotiate a longer-term budget deal. The inability to reach compromise on difficult policy issues—such as the inability to rectify the long-term finances for Social Security, Medicare, and the health care system that are structurally connected in complex ways—are slow-moving train wrecks with broad economic and social consequences. The last time Congress was able to pass some form of immigration reform was in 1986; efforts to pass comprehensive immigration reform have failed repeatedly since then. Finally, it is when the government faces emergencies and crises, such as with the coronavirus, that the longer-term impact of political neglect and partisan gridlock are exposed.

Impact on the Public

The public has also been affected. Negative partisanship has spread from the governing elite to the public at large and has done harm to the country's social institutions.[29] The agreed-upon institutional rules and practices that a functioning society is built on have been damaged by partisan divisions, and many Americans have come to distrust those institutions rather than see them as necessary and beneficial elements of a democratic system of government. Thus, hyper-partisanship of political actors is affecting the electorate who increasingly see parties in strict ideological terms and who are choosing sides in the ongoing political conflict.

All of this political conflict has been intensified by a divided media landscape that has split American society. Where Americans get their news is closely associated with party affiliation and age, with news outlets like Fox News that mix opinion with "facts" and others that turn to even more damaging political conspiracies and anti-government rhetoric. Partisan polarization is reflected in which news sources are trusted and watched. Over time, Republicans' distrust of established, or "mainstream," news grew, while Democrats' support remained steady. Overall, Republican and Republican-leaning individuals rely overwhelmingly on news platforms they trust and believe are credible, while Democrats and independents rely on a different set of sources they deem credible. Americans, it is clear, place their trust in two "nearly inverse media environments."[30]

The consequences for U.S. democracy are worrisome. A February 8, 2021 survey reported that only 16% of Americans believe democracy is working well or extremely well in the United States, and 45% believe democracy isn't functioning properly at all.[31] Such pessimism was already evident in polling during the election campaign in 2016: at that time, just 10% of Americans had a great deal of confidence in the U.S. political system, and only 13% said the two-party presidential system in the country actually worked. Low levels of confidence were also recorded for attitudes about the three branches of government (Supreme Court: 24%, executive branch: 15%, Congress: 4%) and in their own party (29% for Democrats and 17% for Republicans). Neither party, it appears, seems to speak to the concerns of ordinary people. It is no wonder the 2016 poll found that 70% of respondents said they were frustrated about the whole affair.[32]

The polling also documents how Trump's assault on democratic values and his pressure campaign to overturn the 2020 election win of Joe Biden had a measurable effect on the American public. About two-thirds of Americans in February 2021 said Joe Biden was legitimately elected, but only a third of Republicans were convinced of this. Only 42% of Republicans say that Biden respects democratic institutions at least a fair amount.[33]

Looking at issues through a partisan lens has had the effect of "hardening" public opinion. Republican support for Trump remained remarkably consistent during the 2020 election in large part because partisan voters, fed by a partisan media, are resistant to views expressed by others outside their politics of political tribalism. It can lead individuals to support views they feel compelled to defend because of the impulse to close ideological ranks when threatened.[34] In-groups, regardless of composition, work to protect the privileges and power their membership accords them.

IV. The Impact of Partisan Politics

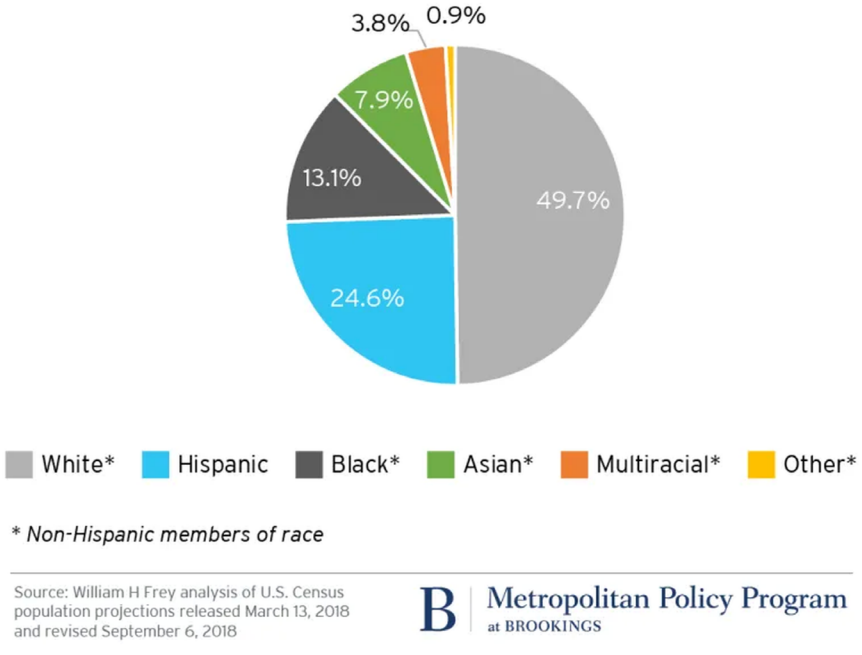
The previous sections examined the adverse effects of expanding economic inequality and declining social mobility and how increasing political partisanship and polarization contributed to growing distrust of government and hindered needed structural reforms. A look at demographic trends such as voters' race and ethnicity, education, income, and religion illuminate the impact of partisan differences on public attitudes and voter preferences and provide a glimpse of the future composition of the American electorate—and, for some, foretell the dynamics of future elections.

Race and Ethnicity

Changes in the racial and ethnic components of the American population reflected in figure 3 provide a glimpse of the demographic shifts that underlie some of the social dynamics and tensions witnessed during the Trump years.[35] One is the decline of the white population in the United States. In 1980, white Americans constituted 80% of the U.S. population. By 2019, that number had declined to 61.1%. In the decade 2010-2020,

Figure 3: *Racial Profile of U.S. Population*

Racial Profile of U.S. population, 2045



SOURCE: William H. Frey, "The US will become 'minority white' in 2045, Census projects," Brookings Institution, March 14, 2018

U.S. census data recorded a decrease in the white population, the first time since the U.S. census began in 1790. Projections are that by 2045—in less than 25 years—the United States will become a minority-white country.

The demographic decline of whites is accompanied by a corresponding increase in the number of racial and ethnic minorities—the real demographic engine of growth in the United States. The U.S. white population is declining in part because older Americans tend to be white, and because real growth in population is fueled by racial and ethnic minorities who in 2020 already outnumbered white Americans among youth under 18 years of age. By 2060, white Americans will be only 36% of the under age 18 population.[36]

Education

Figure 4 shows how important education is and how strongly it is linked to political preferences, party identity, and political polarization.[37] In terms of registered voters in the United States, 36% of Americans have a four-year college degree or more, while 64% have some college or less. More Democratic-leaning voters tend to have a four-year college degree than Republican-leaning voters (41% vs. 30%).[38] The 2016 election data in figure 4 reflect the impact education has had on voter preferences: the differential between Republican and Democratic voters with some college or less was 7% (Republicans: 51%, Democrats: 44%). The gap increases as education increases, widening to 11% for voters with a college degree and jumping to a 37-point spread for voters with post-graduate degrees (Republicans: 29%; Democrats: 66%). Race matters, too. In 2016, 64% of white voters without a college degree voted for Trump. Perhaps

Figure 4: *Polarization of White Voters by Education*

2018 Electorate Highly Polarized By Education Among White Voters

% of validated voters who reported voting for ...

	2016			2018			Share of electorate	
	Share voting for ... Clinton	Trump	Margin (Dem.-Rep.)	Share voting ... Dem.	Rep.	Margin (Dem.-Rep.)	2016	2018
Postgrad	66%	29%	D+37	68%	30%	D+38	14%	19%
4-year college	52	41	D+11	58	41	D+17	23	24
Some college	42	49	R+7	48	49	R+1	34	32
HS or less	44	51	R+7	47	51	R+4	30	25
College grad+	57	36	D+21	62	36	D+26	37	43
Some college or less	43	50	R+7	47	50	R+3	63	57
White college grad+	55	38	D+17	58	40	D+18	30	34
White non-college grad	28	64	R+36	36	61	R+25	44	41

Notes: Based on 3,014 (2016) and 7,585 (2018) validated general election voters. Validated voters are those found to have voted in commercial voter files. Vote choice for both years is from a post-election survey. See Methodology for full details. White and Black adults include only those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race. Don't know responses not shown.
Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 29-Dec. 12, 2016, and Nov. 7-16, 2018.
"Democrats Made Gains From Multiple Sources in 2018 Midterm Victories."

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

SOURCE: Scott Keeter and Ruth Igielnik, "Democrats Made Gains from Multiple Sources in 2018 Midterm Victories," Pew Research Center, September 8, 2020

the most important political trend reflected in Trump's 2016 election win was this movement of working-class white voters toward the GOP, which continued in 2020.[39]

Education is also linked in critical ways to white identity politics and income. The data show that whites who adopt a racial identity are less likely to have attended college.[40] The more highly educated (who are also higher income earners) generally feel racial diversity is a good thing for the country and are not necessarily threatened by minorities moving into their neighborhood.

Income

Data from the 2016 and 2018 elections, seen in figure 5, show how income reflects partisan divides.[41] Democrats did well among poorer and wealthier voters. Just over half of voters with incomes over $150,000 voted Democratic (51%), and voters making less than $30,000 voted Democratic by a margin of 58% to 32%, a 26% gap. Lower income white voters, however, voted more Republican and closed that gap (Democratic: 44%; Republican: 43%).

For middle-income voters in the $50,000-$74,999 income bracket, however, Republicans (46%) and Democrats (48%) battled to a near tie.[42] The race factor emerges again by examining white voters with incomes between $30,000 and $74,999, where Republicans

Figure 5: *Income Level and Support of Candidates*

Democratic Candidates had Wide Advantages Among the Highest- and Lowest-Income Voters

% of validated voters who reported voting for ...

	2016			2018			Share of electorate	
FAMILY INCOME	Share voting for ... Clinton	Trump	Margin (Dem.-Rep.)	Share voting ... Dem.	Rep.	Margin (Dem.-Rep.)	2016	2018
$150,000 or more	51%	44%	D+7	59%	39%	D+20	7%	12%
$100,000-$149,999	48	45	D+3	51	47	D+4	11	16
$75,000-$99,999	39	55	R+16	52	46	D+6	15	15
$50,000-$74,999	48	46	D+2	54	44	D+10	18	17
$30,000-$49,999	42	54	R+12	51	46	D+5	20	17
Less than $30,000	58	32	D+26	62	34	D+28	28	17
$75,000 or more	45	49	R+4	54	45	D+9	33	43
$30,000-$74,999	45	50	R+5	52	45	D+7	38	35
Less than $30,000	58	32	D+26	62	34	D+28	28	17
WHITES								
$75,000 or more	39	55	R+16	50	49	D+1	27	34
$30,000-$74,999	37	58	R+21	44	54	R+10	28	26
Less than $30,000	44	43	D+1	48	48	D+0	18	11

Notes: Based on 3,014 (2016) and 7,585 (2018) validated general election voters. Validated voters are those found to have voted in commercial voter files. Vote choice for both years is from a post-election survey. See Methodology for full details. White and Black adults include only those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race. Don't know responses not shown.
Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 29-Dec. 12, 2016, and Nov. 7-16, 2018.
"Democrats Made Gains From Multiple Sources in 2018 Midterm Victories."

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

SOURCE: Scott Keeter and Ruth Igielnik, "Democrats Made Gains from Multiple Sources in 2018 Midterm Victories," Pew Research Center, September 8, 2020

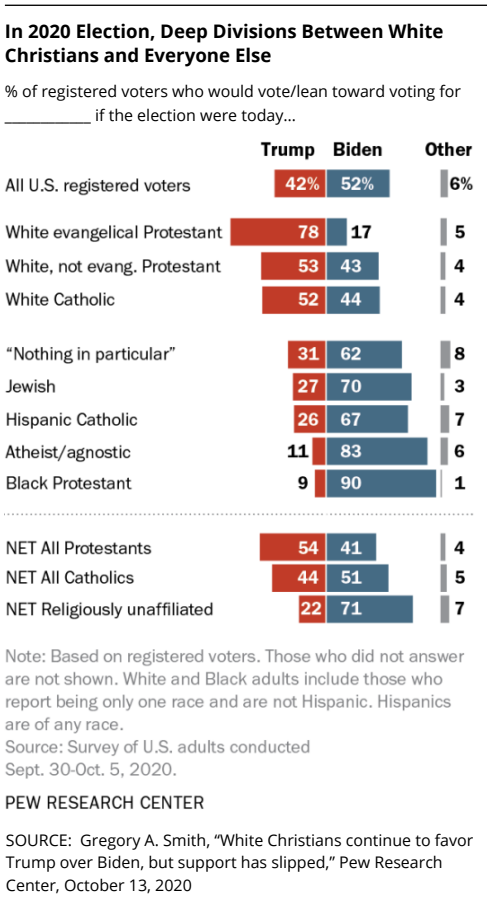
dominated: 58% of voters in this income bracket voted for Trump, as opposed to 32% for Hillary Clinton. The early focus on the white working class as the key voting base for Trump obscured the support these middle-class voters gave to Trump in 2016. Trump voters have relatively high incomes, in part because Republican voters tend to be wealthier overall.[43] In fact, low-income voters are underrepresented in the electorate overall, but particularly in the Republican party. Data compiled during the 2016 primaries reported that the median household income of a Trump voter was $72,000, higher than the national median of income of $56,000.[44]

Certainly, a significant majority of Republicans were worried about the state of the economy in 2016, but arguably their anxiety wasn't necessarily a reflection of impending economic loss, at least in a relative sense. Trump's promises of tax cuts, benefits to business, and corporate and environmental deregulation were issues that gave Trump support from voters in the upper income levels and the very wealthy. But for less wealthy Republicans, especially in the middle class, more emotional anxiety about maintaining status and privilege and the fear of their "way of life" being threatened by outsiders, chaos, and violence proved to be other powerful motivators for backing Trump.[45]

Religion

The September-October 2020 survey data in figure 6 reflect the relationship between partisan views and religious affiliation.[46] The United States is a Christian-majority country, although the number of religiously non-affiliated Americans continues to grow. Almost 80% of registered Republicans self-identify as Christian, while only 15% say they are religiously unaffiliated. For Democrats, about half self-identify as Christian and 38% are religiously unaffiliated.

White Christians are a key segment of registered voters (44%) in the U.S. electorate, and white Christians, particularly white evangelical Protestants, are core Trump supporters. Americans belonging to all other religious groups—Black Protestants, Hispanic Catholics, Jews—and the religiously unaffiliated vote or lean Democratic.[47] The 2020



SOURCE: Gregory A. Smith, "White Christians continue to favor Trump over Biden, but support has slipped," Pew Research Center, October 13, 2020

Figure 6: *Religion and Party Divisions*

election confirmed this long-standing pattern, discernible since the Reagan years: white evangelical Protestants vote Republican while Christians of color and non-religious Americans have tended to vote Democratic.[48] Gender is a factor here, too; white Christian evangelical women are the only group of women showing significant support for Trump, favoring Trump by 53 percentage points.[49]

V. Effects on the Voting Public

Why Demographics Matter: Elections and Battleground States

The purpose of exploring demographic factors is to address the question of how these differences bear out over the longer term among American voters. The decline in Republican support and/or increase in Democratic votes in the battleground states of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania were key factors in Biden's 2020 election victory.[50] Race and ethnicity are particularly relevant here, as figure 7 shows.[51]

From an election perspective, the number of registered voters who are white decreased from 85% in 1996 to 69% in 2020. This may be more worrisome for Republicans than for Democrats in future elections, since white voters account for a larger share of Republican or Republican-leaning voters than Democrats (81% to 59% in 2019). Non-whites make up a larger share of Democratic voters (four in ten) but make up less than a fifth of Republicans.[52] White Americans are also moving south to sunnier states like Florida and Arizona, both critical battleground states in the 2020 election.[53] This may benefit Republicans in the shorter term, though not necessarily in the longer term.

At the same time, critical to the 2020 election outcome was the growing diversity in suburban areas across the United

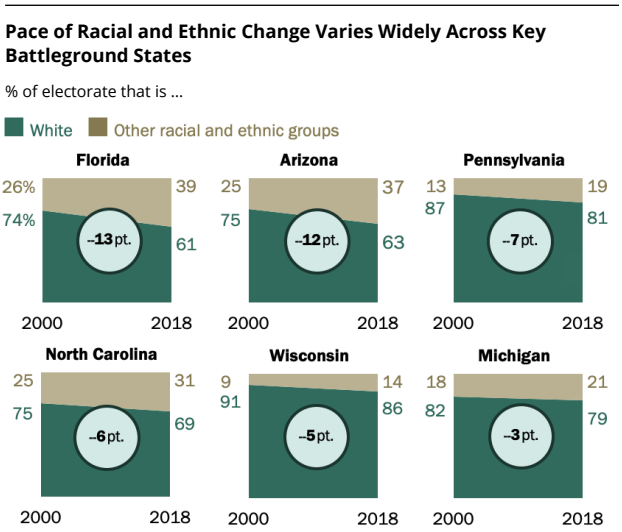


Figure 7: *Racial and Ethnic Change in Battleground States*

SOURCE: Ruth Igielnik and Abby Budiman, "The Changing Racial and Ethnic Composition of the U.S. Electorate: in battleground states, Hispanics grew more than other racial or ethnic groups as a share of eligible voters," Pew Research Center, September 23, 2020

States, which in the past were reliable Republican strongholds. Suburbs near large metropolitan areas have become more "urban" and diverse and thus over time have tended to lean more Democratic. Importantly, minorities now represent over a third (35%) of suburban residents.[54] The political impact of this trend was on full display in the November 2020 election, when suburban voters were central to Biden winning in key battleground states such as Pennsylvania, Georgia, Wisconsin, and Michigan. But demographic diversity alone did not account for all the shift; it was education, along with racial diversity, that fueled support for Biden.[55]

The outcome of the 2020 election shows how complex the U.S. demographic landscape is. Though a thorough analysis of the 2020 election results will take some time still, the expectation that the Democrats will reap most of the political rewards of the demographic shift to a non-white majority population may be premature. While more than four out of five African-Americans vote Democratic,[56] the party profiles of Hispanic and Asian voters are more complex. For one, both minority groups do not vote as a bloc. Mexican-American voters, for example, tend to lean Democratic, as do Puerto Ricans. On the other hand, a majority of the Cuban-Americans in Miami remains loyal to the Republican party.[57] Asian voters vary by origin group, too: Vietnamese-Americans (who, like Cuban-Americans, fled from communism) trend Republican, though Indian-Americans trend Democratic.[58]

The surprise in the 2020 election were the gains Trump made in Hispanic communities in key battleground states. While Joe Biden handily won the Hispanic vote nationwide, in Florida the Trump campaign succeeded in garnering a large share of the minority vote by sowing fear of a "socialist nightmare" among Cuban-Americans, Venezuelans, and Colombians if Democrats were elected. As a consequence, Republicans made significant advances across the ballot.[59] The increased level of support for Republicans in Florida and in other parts of the country is a reminder that minority populations are not monolithic in their attitudes and political preferences. Other cross-cutting issues that shape voter attitudes must be taken into account.

Why These Differences Matter: Examples of Deep Attitudinal Divisions

Deep attitudinal and values-based divisions have a strong bearing on the political discourse, on policy decision making and, ultimately, on the ability of government institutions to respond to the needs of the citizenry. Polarization and political stalemate hinder effective policy making, contribute to the public's distrust of government, and weaken democratic institutions. And, noting the importance of the media, voter attitudes are then shaped by the sources of news and information they are drawn to.

COVID-19

The novel coronavirus pandemic continues to have a profound impact on the lives of Americans, not least because of the extraordinary mishandling of the pandemic by

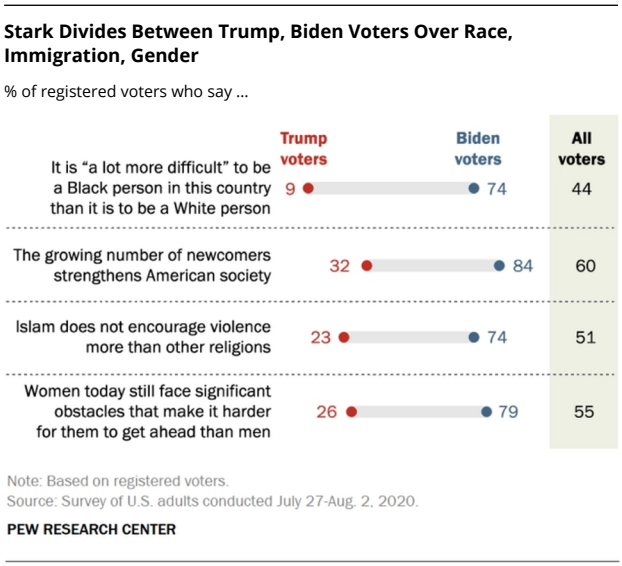
the Trump administration. Its decision to deny the seriousness of the threat and then provide a consistent stream of false, inaccurate, and misleading information has had disastrous consequences. The different messages originating from the divided U.S. media landscape and the Trump administration's inaction and falsehoods shaped attitudes about the coronavirus threat, and strong partisan divisions were evident on a range of pandemic-related issues.

In a June 2020 survey, for example, 61% of Republicans and Republican leaners believed the worst of the coronavirus was behind them, whereas 76% of Democrats and Democratic leaners believed the worst was to come. Fewer than half of Republicans were concerned about unknowingly spreading the coronavirus, versus 77% of Democrats. And while 71% of respondents said it is important to wear masks always or most of the time, only 52% of Republican respondents shared this view.[60]

Republicans were also unwilling to use deficit spending to provide more financial assistance to Americans affected by the pandemic and its economic impact (66% said the government could not afford it), while 79% of Democrats believed more should be done to help those in need.[61] Democrats also believed more strongly that the coronavirus was a major threat to public health (85%), while only 46% of Republicans believed it was a major threat.[62] Attitudes about the pandemic also shaped voting preferences going into the November 2020 election. Asked whether the coronavirus was important to their vote in the election, 82% of Democrats felt it was very important, while only 24% of Republicans shared that view.[63] In the face of the current public health crisis, attitudes shaped by partisan differences have only worsened the crisis.

Attitudes About Race, Immigration, and Gender

The divisive media landscape in the United States and the toxic political discourse over the past four years exposed deep divisions among Americans across a range of values and issues. The intensity of these divisions, and what it implies for American democracy and the capacity of the political system to redress them, is deeply worrisome. Figure 8 lays out some of the challenges.[64]



SOURCE: "Voters' Attitudes About Race and Gender are Even More Divided Than in 2016," Pew Research Center, September 10, 2020

Figure 8: *Attitudes on Race, Immigration, and Gender*

Race. The series of police killings of African-Americans, the protest marches, and the growing prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement put a face and a name to the persistence of structural racism in America, but attitudes about race remain strongly divided. Pew Research Center data reveal that in 2020, 76% of registered voters agreed that being a Black person in America is much more difficult (44%) or "a little more difficult" (32%) than being white. The number of Americans agreeing with this increased from 2016, but the unsettling point is that the increase has come entirely among Democratic voters: 74% of Biden supporters agreed it was more difficult to be Black in America, while only 9% of Trump supporters share this view, virtually unchanged during the Trump presidency. In a similar vein, only 5% of Trump supporters agreed with the statement that white people have more societal advantages than Black people.[65]

Immigration. Arguably, a major issue that propelled Trump to the presidency in 2016 was fear of America's growing ethnic and racial diversity and the related topic of immigration. The Trump administration stoked fears about uncontrolled immigration, demonized immigrants, and passed over 400 executive actions that have fundamentally altered the U.S. immigration system, with long-term repercussions.[66] A majority of Americans do feel immigrants strengthen American society, but given four years of attacks by the Trump White House, the partisan divide on immigration is deep. In 2020, only 32% of Trump supporters believed immigrants strengthen society, as opposed to 84% of Biden supporters.[67] Security is an overwhelming concern for Republicans, 91% of whom feel increasing border security is very or somewhat more important, while slightly less than half of Democrats share this view. Over 8 in 10 Republicans, but only 3 in 10 Democrats, support deportation of unauthorized immigrants.[68]

Gender Equality. Gender inequality is yet another social and economic schism in American society that also reflects partisan differences. The gender gap first began to widen in the 1980s; today, the gender gap is the highest it has ever been and, increasingly, it has been a major fault line between men and women and between Republicans and Democrats.[69]

For example, party differences on whether women still face barriers to career advancement persist; fully 72% of Trump voters believe such barriers no longer exist, while only 20% of Biden supporters agreed with this view (see figure 8). Assessments about progress in gender equality vary by party identification and gender. Women (64%) and Democrats (76%) say it hasn't gone far enough, while only 49% of men and 33% of Republicans share this view. While most Americans (76%) say women's gains have not come at the expense of men, Republican men (38%) are twice as likely to disagree, as opposed to only 19% of Democratic men. Differences along party lines and gender are evident in views about gender discrimination as well. Most Americans feel that gender discrimination is often overlooked, though Democrats (85%) are nearly twice as likely as Republicans (46%) to agree. Republicans believe the bigger problem is seeing gender discrimination where it doesn't exist (53%), though, it must be said, fewer than half of Republican women share this view.[70]

To summarize, the discussion above reflects the degree to which Americans have become polarized by negative partisanship that has split the American public into two hostile camps. Over the past few decades, economic and social inequalities have cut deeply into the American public. The public, in turn, has become increasingly distanced and distrustful of the U.S. government, which through political neglect and negative partisanship has proven incapable of supporting and protecting all citizens. Over the longer term, the American political elite did not take enough measures to alleviate the downsides of these social and economic dislocations, and growing ideological differences led to intensified political partisanship and government gridlock. This in turn led, over time, to weakened institutions and government breakdowns as political leaders became increasingly unable to resolve political divisions. The relevant question is whether the American political elite is willing to return to bipartisanship and a consensual form of politics, to placing the public good above partisan interests and constructing policy solutions that benefit all citizens.

VI. Conclusion: Revitalizing Democracy and Transatlantic Relations

A strong and resilient democracy is the foundation upon which a society depends to meet changing circumstances and crises and ensure a more prosperous, safe, and equitable society for its citizens. From his first day in office, President Biden has taken steps to restore confidence in American institutions and values. He responded quickly to the urgency of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for economic assistance and reversed the worst policy offenses of the Trump administration. With an ambitious domestic and foreign policy agenda, Biden has set the United States on a path of renewal and has appointed experienced officials who have been given a mandate to reform, rebuild, and strengthen U.S. democracy.

The report highlights the difficulties the Biden administration faces in pushing for reform in a fluctuating and highly unpredictable political environment. To achieve the kind of economic, social, and political changes needed, however, requires more political unity and consensus than American politics presently has. On the domestic front, this is the essential challenge for the Biden administration.

Whether Biden can close the gaps, reinvigorate democratic institutions, and address the anger and grievances on both sides of the political divide will unfold in the coming months and years of his administration. There are issues that have bipartisan support and thus have the potential of gaining the necessary majority in the U.S. Senate to act upon them. Nonetheless, how the deep divisions within the Republican party between Trump supporters and traditional conservatives will be resolved—and what role Trump may play—will shape Biden's room for maneuvering and thus the parameters within which the Biden administration's policy initiatives will rise or fall.

President Biden's commitment to democratic renewal at home is matched by his commitment to supporting democratic renewal across the globe. Biden has emphasized that for the United States to recover its standing and voice on the international stage, it must address the problems and inequalities it has at home. The two are inextricably linked. This position is an acknowledgement that a country's own moral principles and democratic values must precede it if the country is to be regarded as a credible actor and partner in the global arena.

A critical part of this effort is repairing America's relationship with its European allies and reestablishing the habits of cooperation that have been neglected. In his inaugural

address, in calls to foreign leaders, and in his remarks during the Munich Security Conference on February 19, 2021, President Biden has reached out to America's European partners to begin defining a new transatlantic agenda that can tackle the shared challenges of the future. On the agenda will be many urgent issues, but democratic renewal and the protection of democracy at home and in multilateral venues will be a critical task for the United States and European countries to address together.

Democratic renewal is a challenge for Europe as well. There are signs that the quality of democracy and its own moral authority also have declined. European governments, like the United States, need to deliver for their own citizens, leading by example as they also work to support democratic values and good governance abroad. President Biden has called this moment an "inflection point" for the advancement of democracy, a moment when significant change can occur. What might a joint transatlantic "progress for democracy" agenda encompass?

Most immediately, close transatlantic coordination at the global level to address the COVID-19 pandemic is a democratic issue. The United States has rejoined the World Health Organization, and with its European partners the United States can help push back "vaccine nationalism," the effects of which severely disadvantage poorer countries. Developing an equitable and global strategy for vaccine distribution will be vital in safeguarding states against nativist and authoritarian pressures.

The fight against misinformation and hate speech is another democracy-related issue that can be tackled together. Observers have long pointed to the growing transnational and transatlantic networks of right-wing extremist groups. Closer collaboration and exchange of information to understand the physical and virtual spaces in which groups interact—the cyberspace they inhabit, their financial capabilities, and how they communicate with and recruit members internationally—will help build effective response mechanisms to mitigate the impact and influence of anti-democratic forces.

Finally, Europe and the United States can integrate assistance to struggling countries and the fight against disinformation into an organized global strategy to deter the illiberal assault on democracy by countries such as Russia and China. Transatlantic partners can help secure resilient and vigorous democracies by working in tandem with an engaged group of countries—not as "leaders" but as equal partners—to address the root causes of instability that weaken both established and developing democracies alike. Addressing the downsides of globalization and structural inequalities at home that have weakened democratic institutions and values is, as President Biden noted, the way to live by the power of example, not just the example of power.

Global cooperation and coordination of democracy efforts—establishing democratic standards, rule of law, and good governance structures—to protect democracies, reinforce the rules-based international order, and counter growing authoritarian governance models requires a commitment of political will, resources, and sustained effort. It is with this commitment, however, that the United States and Europe can make a significant contribution in securing more resilient and vigorous democracies at home and abroad.

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